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Meaning Making in Communication Processes: the Role of a Human Agency

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Abstract

Social theorists often neglect the fact that human beings are not only recipients but also producers of cultural meanings. Peirce's theory of semiosis highlights the active character of human agency. Introducing the notion of interpretant into semiotics, Pierce considers the process of interpretation or interpretive thought to be a condition of signification, which necessarily involves an interpreting agent, a meaning-making human being. This paper offers a comparative analysis of Peirce's and Eco's theories of semiosis and examines the role of an interpreting agent involved in the semiotic process which is only possible in communication.

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1. Introduction

When social theorists apply quasi-evolutionary terms in order to emphasise some aspects that characterise the development of a human being in the contemporary society, they primarily refer to humans as recipients of information which the latter process and respond to in their actions and attitudes. Homo sociologicus (Dahrendorf, 1973), Homo ludens (Huizinga, 1955), homo totus (Jung, 1971, para. 419) – these terms populating social sciences texts qualify humans as cultural, communicating beings, largely taking into account a particular feature of a communicative act, which involves a sender, a message and a recipient. So do other, more recent descriptors of humans as *homo zwischens* (hesitant man) (Matveyeva, 2006) and nowbrow (human observing the ritual of consumption) (Seabrook, 2001).

Those who use these terms assume that a particular culture presents human beings with a certain behaviour model which humans follow, hence the aforementioned names that reflect human tendency to absorb norms and practices saturated with cultural meanings and respond to those meanings in various ways. However, those who use these quasi-evolutionary terms sometimes overlook the fact that the contemporary person does not only consumes but also produces new meanings.

Peirce's theory of semiosis (developed in the early XX century) takes into account this latter feature of human agency highlighting the active character of human agency. Introducing the notion of interpretant into semiotics, Pierce considers the process of interpretation or interpretive thought to be a condition of signification, which

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necessarily involves an interpreting agent, a meaning making human being (Nöth, 2001, p. 11). Peirce proposes the idea of semiotic connectedness by introducing the concept of a "man-sign" (Hartshorne et al, 1931–60, Vol. 5, para 314). The human being here is himself or herself a sign in the world of signs and, in the triad of representamen, object and interpretant, joins together the three components of the sign thus creating a meaningful whole.

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2. From Peirce's semiosis to Eco's theory of sign.

The sign/person dichotomy is the most important element in the meaning making process and is presented as a mediating link between thought and speech sounds. This pan-semiotic worldview creates a possibility of perceiving the semiosphere – semiotic space – as a real space of words and other meaningful symbols spanning the globe. As Lotman claims that only in the semiosphere communication processes are possible and new information can be developed (Lotman, 1999, p. 13). Various sign systems are thus presented as models of concrete fragments of the external world perceived as objective reality.

In other words, the concept of Peirce's unlimited semiosis is an integral part of the process of a human being's acquaintance with himself / herself and the world. Language as a manmade system of signs is the core of all communication processes. A person is the holder and carrier of language, and by using signs people are able to think in abstract terms and to reflect on their own nature and the world, thus entering into various forms of communication.

Eco expanded Peirce's theory of semiosis and interpretation considering it in the context of societal communication processes — he uses Peirce for constructing his own communication models. For Eco, the problematic aspect of a sign consists in the sign's dual role: on the one hand, the sign is the basic concept of the theory of semiosis, and on the other hand, the sign is what gives the process of semiosis its dynamic character. One of the sign's key features is its interpretability as a sign, and the sign acquires a meaning only at the intersection of interpretations inherent in the cultural milieu. The interpreter, which is understood as a translator of cultural traditions, defines the direction which semiosis takes. Thus the interpreter becomes a key figure in the process of signification, and Eco also emphasizes that the process of signification entails creativity.

3. Interpretation in semiotics and hermeneutic interpretation

In our opinion, Eco fully reveals the potential of Peirce's theory of semiosis and interpretation in his *The Role of the Reader, Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts, Saying Almost the Same Thing and The Open Work*. By "interpretation" Eco means the concept proposed by Peirce, according to which each interpretant of each representamen is another kind of representation, referred to the same "object" (Eco, 2006, p. 99).

Eco opposes interpretation in semiotics to hermeneutic interpretation: semiotics reveals a wide range of relationships within the object and outside of the object, while hermeneutic interpretation contributes to the revelation of another secondary meaning. For Gadamer, as Eco notes, every instance of understanding amounts to interpretation that takes place in the semantic field, conditioned by language. For example, deciphering the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone by comparing hieroglyphic, demotic and hermeneutic inscriptions would be, for Peirce, already interpretation, whilst as far as Gadamer is concerned, comparison is not yet understanding.

Eco asserts that the Peircean interpretation is wider than hermeneutical interpretation (Eco, 2006, p. 275). He claims that a specific act of symbolic activity generates interpretation, thus treating interpretation as a result of communication. Following Peirce, Eco presents the process of interpretation as a purposeful communicative act and proposes his own idea of "unlimited semiosis", the process of infinite interpretations of signs using other signs (Eco, 2005).

4. Eco's unlimited semiosis

Eco does not equate culture with language, as the former is a strictly codified system of sign activity. This determines the philosopher's orientation towards the process of semiosis, rather than towards its result, as he introduces a human being into semiosis elucidating this by analysing the act of *transaction*.

Eco examines transaction as a process of interpretation in which mutual understanding cannot be reduced simply to sending and receiving messages. When communication is considered as transaction, it is seen as a process of mutual creation of messages and at the same time as the expression, exchange of ideas and feelings.

Eco notes that the form of the sign is not based on some rule but results from a compromise whereby the parties involved in the communicational transaction give something up in order to get something (Eco, 2006, p.19). The result of the transaction is never predetermined and potentially allows for a wide range of possibilities and ramifications. Eco asserts that no one knows in advance how the reader will interpret the author's text. In the act of transaction, concrete signs that are used in communication are not as important as the moment of reaching an agreement in the communicative act.

In this context, the meaning created by a human agent is defined as the translation of one system of signs into another system of signs (Eco, 2006, p. 274), which demonstrates the infinite openness of the text.

According to Eco, an open text is a typical example of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic device, which entails ways of its own interpretation in the very process in which it is being generated (Eco, 2005, pp. 11–12). From our point of view, the structure of the text itself predetermines the limits of its interpretation according to the nature of the sign and coding methods employed in this situation. In addition, there is something else that limits the openness of the text and the range of its interpretation: the involvement of human agency. People involved in the communicative situation themselves determine the continuity and completeness of the process of interpretation.

In this context, semiosis is unlimited and acquires the ability to unroll itself amongst the constellation of manmade interpretants whereby a human being names things and organizes the world. Therefore a person (in Eco's theory, a reader) becomes the centre of communication processes. In connection with this Eco follows Peirce's theory of semiosis and determines the role of a person in the processes of semiosis as a measure of the integrity and continuity of the totality of semiotic processes which consist in generating new signs: it is human agency that organises and disciplines the creation of signs, secures order and meaning and prevents chaos in the accumulation of newly generated signs.

5. Human agency and the mechanisms of sign dynamics

This conclusion makes it possible to identify the role of human agency in the mechanisms of sign dynamics as *homo significans* (Chandler, 2006). The term «*Homo significans* - meaning-makers» is introduced with reference to the Pierce's study (Chandler, 2006) and reflects human beings' desire to create meanings. According to Peirce, we generate meaning, think only in signs, in other words, "Nothing is a *sign* unless it is interpreted as a *sign*" (Chandler, 2006). Eco observes, following Pierce, that semiosis is self-explicable as this constant circulation is the normal condition of signification (Chandler, 2006). *Homo significans*, a person creating an interpretant, a meaning-maker, is a meaning-making link in the process of signification.

An act of donation can be used as an example of the role that a human being plays in the processes of signification. In the act of donation, the giver, the gift and the recipient are connected with one another: the giver loses his or her property, rejects his or her ownership of the object, whilst the recipient takes possession of the object. This transaction constitutes a single legal act. Similarly, an object, a sign and an interpretant are all connected in semiosis, they are interdependent, united in constituting a single phenomenon of meaning-making. For example, if a man knocks on the door, the sound produced by this action is a sign for the person behind the door who hears it. The one who knocks is an object whilst the response to the sound of knocking would be an interpretant. However, semiosis is an open-ended process in which the interpretant can become a new sign.

6. Conclusion

As Lukianova and Fell note earlier, "[t]he symbolic function is one of the primary functions of human activity, similar to consuming food, space orientation, and movement. This function is a fundamental and persistent process of the human brain" (Lukianova and Fell, 2015, p. 532). Without humans, semiosis is impossible, and a human being can be involved in semiosis only via communicative practice. As Eco observes, shifts of meaning take place only in communication considered as act of transaction, by means of introducing new interpretants and new codes. The meaning is not given to us *apriori*, we actively create it through a complex interaction of codes or conventions in the communication process.

Having said that, the process of signification is not exclusively a process of binding interpretants into a single network of communications. What one person may take as an obvious conclusion from the sequence of facts that he or she has identified and used in the formation of a particular interpretant, another person may not see this as the same interpretant. Consequently, the process of signification is not a mechanical connection of interpretants: the mechanism of grasping an idea is required here, the mechanism that would allow us to assert that an event that we acknowledge in semiosis actually took place.

A person, homo significans becomes this “mechanism” of binding that which is not connectable. If there is no transaction in the communication situation, then sign systems eject people from the communicative process, turning the world into the chaos of signs, and only a human being in his or her role of homo significans can create new sociocultural reality out of this chaotic mass of signs via communication.

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